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ABSTRACT

If lesbian and gay students are to be moved into the classroom writing communities consciously and aggressively, in the same way other "minorities" are included, then first-person narratives are an effective starting place for their own work and as material for reading and discussion. Half of the reading selections in one composition teacher's classroom are by gay or lesbian writers, and half of those are not white. The benefits for students of addressing gay and lesbian issues include bridging the gap between their own writing and writing for school. When homosexuality is not normal in the classroom, a particular group of writers is silenced, a group whose lives are already bounded by silence on far too many sides. When this happens, students are encouraged to keep to themselves, separate from the world of academic interchange for which the classroom is supposed to be preparing them. (RS)

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Writing in the REAL World: Homophobia vs. Community in the Composition Classroom

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This paper is as much about me as it is about my students. Like so many of them, I never realized that the writing I did in school could be important to me. When I started working on this paper, I thought back to my own career as a writer in college. What surprised me most was how clearly the memories divided into two separate threads.

All during college I knew I was a writer, knew I had things to say, that getting them down on paper mattered. I'd sit up nights, pounding into my typewriter, letting everything that was inside spill out onto the page. Before I went to bed, I'd tiptoe down the hall and slide the whole pile under my friend Debbie's door. We had a deal that way. I'd wake her at eight in the morning, she'd brew fresh coffee, and we'd sit on her bed picking out the best lines, deciding which sections were worth trying to shape into poems.

My writing then was full of many of the cliches of lesbian erotica, lesbian power—sea caves, an ocean home, warrior women, clenched fists, proud breasts. I was learning the language and images of my people, my culture. When I got too carried away, Debbie would pull me back to earth. She never felt uncomfortable being critical of the parts of my writing she didn't like, and I didn't mind her criticism because her enthusiasm for my work was so pervasive. It was OK not to get things right sometimes.

I knew I was a writer.

But that's not the way it was in my classes. All the papers I wrote—it never crossed my mind that they could be part of being a writer, too. I did those because I had to: perfunctorily, usually adequately, with only a very, very occasional spark of enthusiasm. They didn't matter enough to stay up all night working on them. I would never have slid one of them under Debbie's door. As far as I was concerned, they weren't writing. The writer me was a lesbian, but as a student, I was never encouraged to identify myself as a lesbian in the classroom.

In light of this remembered split in my life, my goal as a teacher is to enable my students to consciously claim their identities, their cultures in the classroom in order to help them become

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writers—the kind of writer I was as an undergraduate when I sat up nights as a habit, waiting to see what words were there, pushing my work on people, hungry for an audience and a response. Once my students have become writers of that sort, I can help them move back to academia, help them bridge the gap—the one that stayed open in my own life for so many years because neither my teachers nor I could see it existed. I don't want them to feel divided between real Writing with a capital 'W' and lower-case 'w' writing for school.

To achieve this, I've made increasing use of first-person narrative in my classes, both as a starting place for their own work and as material for reading and discussion. We move from simpler, story-telling narrative to various kinds of what I call "argumentative narration," work by writers like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldua that uses personal experience as one sort of support in a variety of rhetorical structures. I've come to realize that in deciding which narratives to include in my reader I am essentially constructing reality, deciding what will be presented as "normal" in my classrooms. Because the classroom and the text <u>are</u> a reality, a world I'm asking my students to live in for the duration of the quarter.

In my choices, I've committed myself to diversity. Not the thinly spread diversity of so many readers that claim to incorporate, for example, chicano culture by grace of a single entry, perhaps two, by a chicano writer. Not the diversity of scattered "ethnic" writers counterbalanced by a solid preponderance of works by white, male intellectuals. In my readers, the majority is not white. The majority is also not straight. Half of the pieces in my current reader, 44 are by lesbians or gay men. More than half of these are lesbians and gay men of color. They are a diverse group—and the issues they write about are equally diverse, including childrearing, changes from generation to generation within their cultures, body size and physical ability. They're all honest about their sexual orientation, but they also have a lot more they want to talk about.

Several years ago, I wouldn't have done this. I wouldn't have had these lesbians and gay men represented in my readers, wouldn't have really thought about it despite my own obvious connection to the issue. But, neither was I <u>choosing</u> to create a silence. Mostly I was just young, still using the texts I'd been trained on, not looking beyond the texts the publishers offered me, and not looking very closely inside them, either. It literally took me years to see that lesbians and gay men weren't in those books, that I wasn't in them. But in a way, this doesn't surprise me. One of the most basic realities of lesbian and gay existence is the silence—the silence of society, of our families, all too often our own silences. We're so used to the silence that sometimes, amazingly enough, we forget to hear it. And this silence has to be listened for, the absences have to be looked for determinedly because society won't encourage us to notice, to question. Lesbians and gay men are still fighting to scrape out that

hard-earned and far too inadequate "lip service" respect or occasional token representation that's been grudgingly granted to other so-called "minorities."

These silences shape what it means to be a lesbian or gay student in a straight class. That may sound funny—giving classes a sexual orientation. But they do have them, the same way everything in this society has them. By omission if not by outright declaration. Silence doesn't make things neuter; it makes them straight.

As teachers, we need to recognize this fundamental truth about silences. We need to acknowledge that, whether we intend it or not, the omission of lesbian and gay concerns in our classrooms is not, cannot be neutral. The omission of lesbian and gay concerns in our classroom operates in direct support of all the other silences our lesbian and gay students are facing in other parts of their lives.

We also need to recognize the power that we hold as ultimate authorities. Our students may respond to each other's papers, but it's our response the evaluations and grades are based on. If these silences are to be broken, it's our responsibility to break them first. Just creating a "comfortable" classroom—whatever that is—won't be enough. There are, of course, the rare students who'll plow through anyway, but to assume that all students share their brashness or that those who don't have nothing to say, or worse yet simply don't exist at all, is careless at best, a real violation of professional responsibility at worst.

What can we expect from our students, both gay and straight, when we break these silences? What can an environment free from homophobia bring out in them? What we can expect is almost everything. Because homosexuality is so unspeakable, dealing with it calmly and directly, making it speakable, makes a whole range of other issues speakable. Allowing lesbians and gay men to name themselves allows all students to name the previously unnamed parts of themselves as well.

My methods for introducing lesbian and gay concerns vary. Some quarters, I come out on the first day of class, tell students that we'll be reading a lot of lesbian and gay material, that I'm sharing it with them because it's what I know and love best. Other times, I'm more cautious. I'll move into the lesbian and gay material around the third or fourth week of the quarter, beginning with gay writers who are not writing about specifically gay issues before moving into the more "blatant" stuff. I've taught one intermediate composition course, titled "Writing Ourselves," that focused entirely on lesbian and gay concerns.

Regardless of the approach I take, I've been rewarded by seeing students respond positively to the material they're presented with. They may be initially uncomfortable—for virtually all of them this has never been the stuff of classroom discussions before—but

gradually it draws them out, encourages them to take stock of their own most precious parts of themselves. As one student put it to me in an end-of-the-quarter letter,

> . . .it was wonderful from the start that you were honest. It made me feel like if you could trust me/us enough to share a part of you, then I could so the same. There was a line of communication opened which I don't think (I know) wouldn't have existed, which gave this class a lot more meaning and depth.

Or as another said,

> . . .it [dealing with lesbian and gay issues] made the class more personal, and people felt like they could reveal anything about themselves and not be put down for it.

Consideration of lesbian and gay issues brings up a far-reaching range of topics in students' own minds. For example, discussions in my classes of lesbian and gay concerns have led to discussions of the right to love, of the differences between love and sex, and from there to women's right to reject unwanted sexual contact, and on to rape and incest—generally forbidden subjects that have unfortunately been major forces in too many of my female students' lives. Discussions of the lack of positive representations of lesbians and gay men in popular culture have led to discussions of the absence of people of color in textbooks. The simple fact is that lesbian and gay concerns aren't isolated matters, they are, as most students come to recognize, intimately connected to other questions of identity and freedom.

In addition to the ways lesbian and gay issues can bring students to examine different aspects of their own lives, our straight students benefit from discussing and writing about these issues because most have been touched directly, in one way or another, by lesbian and gay concerns, and almost none of them have had a chance to discuss these in any sort of productive way. As my student Marcy put it,

> . . . in high school, had a teacher come out, he or she would have been the topic of many furtive and not-so-furtive discussions in the halls. I've never really cared, but it's nice to hear about homosexuality from someone who is a lesbian, rather than just someone who thinks they know everything about it.

And the simple truth is that one in four of our students does have a gay family member. This person may or may not be out, the student

may or may not be aware of their identity, but these issues are a part of their immediate lives.

One of my students, Maggie, had just found out about her brother's homosexuality a year before taking my course. She was still the only person in their family he'd told, and she took the responsibility implied in this very seriously. For her, discussing gay issues, writing a term paper on "The Coming Out Experience" was a way of loving her brother better, of being family, of providing him with extra support to compensate for the support he couldn't seek from their parents.

Because I'm a lesbian who hopes to have children someday, I was delighted when another student, Johnna, wrote a proposal for a term paper on the experiences of children of gay people. Both of her parents were gay and she was looking forward to writing and thinking about what this had meant in her life.

The first installment of her paper was a disappointing piece on "What Makes People Gay?," drawing primarily on homosexuality-as-an-illness sorts of texts written by straight psychiatrists. While I found this very misrepresentative, what I didn't realize was that the materials Johnna was using reflected fairly accurately what life was like in her own family. Her father had died of alcoholism. Her mother was also a substance abuser, unable to provide Johnna with financial or emotional support as she worked her way through school. At eighteen years old, Johnna was on her own—and her experience had taught her that homosexuals were alcoholics and drug addicts incapable of offering the support one would expect from a family member.

I discovered all this when I read the second installment of Johnna's paper, which used examples from her family life to illustrate the psychiatrists' theories. Going over the paper in person, Johnna and I talked about what she'd written. She was honest with me about her home life and the pressures she was facing trying to make it through school. I was honest with her about how the paper made me feel as a lesbian, particularly as a lesbian who hoped to have children someday, how I didn't see myself reflected in it. Johnna responded by describing the difficulty she'd had finding materials with alternate views in the university library. She also acknowledged that she was realizing that the picture she'd painted of gay family life wasn't universal, that it was alcoholism that had shaped life in her home, not homosexuality.

On the last day of class, when students gave brief reports on their research, I was surprised to hear Johnna say, "I wound up writing my paper on what makes people gay, but now that I'm done, I don't really care. That seems like a stupid question. It only matters what makes people gay if you think it's wrong to be gay. If you think being gay is normal, then it doesn't matter. Sure there are creepy gay people out there, but there are creepy straight people too. I think most gay people must be pretty OK." Johnna had clearly

come to terms with an issue that had been eating at her. By depicting the reality of life in her family, she had been able to move beyond it, to see the particular juxtaposition of alcoholism and homosexuality in her home, and to acknowledge other people's experiences.

One of the most enjoyable times I've had as a teacher was the quarter I taught "Writing Ourselves," an intermediate composition course devoted exclusively to lesbian and gay concerns. I repeatedly found myself overcome by the miracle of it all—nineteen of us, gathered together, exploring and writing about what most of us would acknowledge as the central issue of our lives. For all of us, the class offered a frequently repeated message on the value of community. The pleasure of our work together lay, not simply in being able to write about our experience, but in being able to write about it for an audience of genuine peers, people who shared our identity and our experiences. We could analyze our community, question its values, even make fun of it, knowing that the reality underlying our conversations, our writing needed no explanations. We knew what we were talking about.

Ricardo could write an essay about his rethinking of the gay men's cruising scene directed at other men who'd been a part of that scene the way he had. He didn't have to apologize for it, explain or defend it. Instead, he could move straight into his analysis, acknowledging the pleasures this lifestyle had brought him and discussing his growing lack of trust of other men in the age of AIDS. His ambivalence wouldn't be misinterpreted as an attack on the gay community; it was merely part of his examination of the life he wanted to lead within that community.

Tony delighted us with "A Field Guide to Monterey Bay Dykes," a satire on the foibles of the local lesbian scene. Because we all knew, and were part of, the community she described, we could laugh at it together. Her jokes needed no explaining.

This class set a standard for me that I've tried to match in classes ever since—that of writing for a community, as an insider, rather than as an outsider. I don't want to put any of my "minority" writers in a position where they're allowed to write about their identities, but only to explain themselves to the "majority." Instead, I try to give them the pleasure of writing for others who are like them, which means stretching my own limits, pushing myself to respond to things in the way the audience they've chosen would respond.

Looking at these benefits to addressing lesbian and gay issues in our writing classrooms, I feel convinced of the importance of this work. As writing teachers, we have a responsibility to do this; a responsibility that may push some of us beyond the limits of our own experience. But as Audre Lorde so wisely points out in "The

Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," how many of us would tell our department chairpersons that we can't teach Shakespeare because his experience is too unlike our own? The bottom line is—if we don't include lesbian and gay concerns, our classes aren't inclusive. Silence isn't neuter; silence is straight.

What each of us needs to do is ask ourselves, how does it feel to be a lesbian or gay man in my writing classroom? Is it safe? Is it anything more than safe? We may know that we'd be willing to read a student's work on lesbian or gay issues, but do our students know this? And when they write, will they write as insiders or outsiders? What actions have we taken to make it possible for them to share this writing with other students in our classroom? We must give our students the right to write about their lives—not to justify them, to defend or explain them, but to move into the richer questions that face them.

Lesbian and gay students need to be moved into our classroom writing communities consciously and aggressively, in the same way we're learning to include other "minorities." In our classrooms, homosexuality needs to be normal. Not a "normal variation." Not a "normal alternative" to heterosexuality. Just plain normal. When we don't make homosexuality normal in our classrooms, we're choosing to silence a particular group of writers. A group of writers whose lives are already bounded by silence on far too many sides. When this happens—as too many of my teachers did to me, as I'm afraid I've done more often than I realize—we're encouraging these students to keep themselves, their hearts separate from the university, from the world of academic interchange we're supposed to be preparing them for.